



U.S. Forest Service  
Large Air Tanker Fact Sheet  
June 11, 2012

The management of risk guides every decision we make in the management of fire and underscores our primary commitment to safeguard public and firefighter safety as we protect communities and the country's natural resources.

The U.S. Forest Service, in cooperation with our federal, state, tribal, and local partners in the wildland fire management system, is prepared to respond vigorously to wildfires. The Forest Service suppresses almost 98 percent of wildfires on initial attack, keeping unwanted fires small and costs down.

With a wide array of firefighters, equipment and aircraft, we are confident in our ability to mobilize assets to effectively meet needs where and when they arise.

Advances in wildland fire prediction (technology and analysis) continue to strengthen our ability to make strategic and risk-informed decisions, including the best mix, placement and arrangement of firefighters, equipment, and aircraft where needs are likely to be greatest.

Aircraft alone do not put out wildfires. Retardant applied from large air tankers can slow the progress of a wildfire so firefighters on the ground can safely construct fireline. The best mix of tools for wildland firefighting includes ground and air resources.

The U.S. Forest Service currently has 16 large airtankers and 1 very large airtanker available for wildfire suppression, including:

- 9 operational large airtankers on exclusive use contracts (8 P2Vs and 1 BAe-146)
- 5 CV-580 Convairs, one through an agreement with the state of Alaska and four through an agreement with the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre
- 2 CAL FIRE S-2Ts through an agreement with the state of California (available for use in California only)
- 1 DC-10 very large airtanker on a "call when needed" contract

The U.S. Forest Service has the ability to mobilize an additional 11 large airtankers, including:

- 8 military C-130s equipped with Modular Airborne Fire Fighting Systems (MAFFS)
- 3 CV-580 Convairs, available through an agreement with the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre

The U.S. Forest Service has the ability to mobilize more than 100 helicopters and Single Engine Air Tankers (SEATS). This includes:

- 30 heavy, 33 medium, and 61 light helicopters on exclusive use contracts;
- 57 heavy, 78 medium, and 171 light helicopters on call when needed contracts

- 1 SEAT on an exclusive use contract

Additional aircraft are available through U.S. Department of the Interior contracts, including:

- 9 medium helicopters on exclusive use contracts
- More than 75 SEATS
- 2 CL-215 scoopers on exclusive use contracts

Large air tankers will be strategically pre-positioned at air tanker bases as professional fire managers determine they are needed to ensure the ability to respond as efficiently and effectively as possible to ongoing and anticipated fire activity.

Large air tankers, and other firefighting assets, are nationally mobile and are moved frequently, depending on need. Understanding the mobility of assets is foundational when considering firefighting capability. Aviation assets are especially mobile. A focus on locations where assets are based misses the strength, agility, and active management of this successful firefighting system.

The U.S. Forest Service is deeply committed to improving and modernizing the large air tanker fleet. Large airtankers play an important role in wildland firefighting, particularly during initial attack, by slowing the progress of wildfires so firefighters on the ground can safely construct firelines to contain them. In February, the U.S. Forest Service announced the “Large Airtanker Modernization Strategy” and transmitted it to Congress, to replace the fleet of aging airtankers with newer large air tankers that are safer, faster, and more cost-effective.

The U.S. Forest Service has already started to implement the Large Airtanker Modernization Strategy, which recommends 18 to 28 large air tankers, by issuing a contract solicitation for “next generation” air tankers that are more reliable, faster, and can carry more retardant than the “Legacy” air tankers (P2Vs) in the existing fleet. Through this contract solicitation, the U.S. Forest Service is working towards adding 3 “next generation” air tankers to the fleet in 2012; 4 “next generation” air tankers to the fleet in 2013; and additional “next generation” airtankers to the fleet in 2014 and 2015, contingent on funding and other factors. The “Legacy” large air tankers will continue to be part of the agency’s strategy to maintain capability and response until there are enough “next generation” large air tankers.